

Picture this!

The house of Meleager at Pompeii

Katharina Lorenz

Marcus: "Who are those people on the wall? The ones with the saxophones and the trumpets?"

Will: "Saxophonists and trumpeters."

Marcus: "But who are they? And why are they on your wall?"

Nick Hornby *About a boy*

It's all on the wall

How come one of Europe's hippest magazines for contemporary trends in fashion and design is called *Wallpaper*? And why is Nick Hornby's inquisitive young character Marcus so keen to know the reasons why his older mate-to-be Will chose certain pictures for his flat when he gets familiar with him? Contemporary sociologists and environmental psychologists tell us this is because there is a direct link between ourselves, our interests, ideas and wishes (whether individual or collective), on the one hand, and the way we decorate our areas of living. The interior decoration of houses, and especially the walls are a central component of the message a house relays to us. And that decoration also influences the daily living of the inhabitants themselves by providing the constant stage for their lives. Gromit, for example, has his room decorated with wallpaper that sports a defining element of his species and a central interest in his life: dog bones.

This interdependence of decoration and room user is not just a feature of our contemporary world, but can also be used as starting-point from which to gain a deeper understanding of expectations in ancient societies. The houses of Roman Pompeii form a good test case for this: because they were covered in ashes by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79, they have preserved most of their interior decoration. From the 2nd century BC down to the town's destruction, the people of Pompeii decorated their walls various schemes of decoration, which changed over time, the so-called Four Pompeian Styles. A major feature of the Third and Fourth of these Styles are the numerous square-framed figure scenes in the centre of a wall. These 'picture panels' appear in most areas of the houses. The great majority show episodes from Greek myth, and they lay special stress on scenes of men and women interacting.

Hits and myths

Mythological pictures are a particularly powerful means of communication. Pictures with scenes from myth refer back to known stories, alluding to single episodes or even to extended narratives. But at the same time, because they are pictures of people interacting, they can also be read as everyday encounters, models for emulation or avoidance. The myths chosen to adorn walls offer a glimpse of the people in Pompeii who commissioned, created and viewed them. The pictures become a reflection of actual Roman life: not a photographic copy, but an improvisation on certain themes. Different pictures, certainly, perform different functions, depending on their specific design and placing in the house; and different arrangements, no doubt, represent the varied interests of the people who originally commissioned and created them.

What a picture communicates depends not just on its own particular composition, but also on its position within the sequence of other pictures close to it. Most of these 'panel pictures' appear in combinations of threes or fours in rooms. The combinations may complement one another in theme, they may contrast with one another, or they may build up an overall, consecutive story line. Picture sequences sometimes deliver a bold message, with all pictures focussing on a particular aspect – as for example when all four pictures represent a courageous hero. But sometimes they envelope the viewer in an extended meditation on a theme, as when each picture represents a stage in a man's relationship with a woman, with different endings implied so as to bring together consecutive and contrasting story elements.

Rooms for manoeuvre

Let us take an example. The so-called House of Meleager, decorated shortly before A.D. 62, has about 38 mythological panels in the rooms around atrium (the inner court leading to all the other parts of the house) and peristyle (courtyard). The house is divided into three areas by its mythological decoration. The first area is formed by the entrance and the atrium. Compare the two pictures in the entrance passage: a scene of Meleager and Atalante and a picture of Hermes and Demeter. Two male-female couples, the first pair human and the second gods: presumably at some level they reflect upon the actual heads of the house, the master and mistress. Meleager and Atalante are famous mythical lovers, united by the common purpose of destroying the rampant boar of Calydon (see, for example, book 8 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). At one level, they could be read as an ideal Roman husband and wife: a courageous hunter and a strong but attractive woman. But there is a hint of tragedy too: in Ovid's version, at least, Meleager slays those who mock his love-sickness, and is in return magically poisoned. This element of romantic danger, though, may have even served to make the owners seem all the more glamorous.

Hermes and Demeter, the gods in the picture (above) on the other side of the passage, seem to symbolize financial wealth and a prosperous household. Hermes is putting a purse (marsupium) into Demeter's lap. There is no mythological story on which this scene could be based, but Hermes is a guarantor for financial wealth and appears frequently in the entrance area of Pompeian houses, indicating their (hoped for) prosperity. Demeter, on the other hand, as goddess associated with grain, secures the food supply. The two pictures complement each other in their bold statements: they signal prosperity and present a heroic male and a beautiful female. These pictures make for a very powerful message, especially in the entrance area. For guests to the house (including 'clients', poorer members of society seeking support from a 'patron'), they express the self-confidence, ability and power of the master and mistress of the house.

Similar bold messages highlighting issues of family status are expressed in the four mythological panels of the atrium, and also in the paintings of the second area of the house, the tablinum and the larger rooms along the north-east sides of the peristyle. Yet the further we get into the house, the stronger the contrast with the family scenes in the entrance and atrium. The pictures further

inside the house tell stories in sequence. This is especially true in the grand triclinium or dining room), where two scenes from the life of Paris, the ill-fated initiator of the Trojan War, are depicted. In one, he chooses his favourite goddess among Hera, Athena and Aphrodite; in the other he prepares to march into battle. Here the room's central theme is positive male rather than family values. This reflects the different role of this room, expressing the power of the male host more than that of the family.

The third area finally comprises the peristyle, with sixteen panels, as well as the three rooms on the south side of the atrium each decorated with two pictures. Here, status representation does not seem to be on the agenda at all: the atmosphere created through the pictures is much more open than in the other two areas. We find pictures with single figures from the realm of the wine god Dionysos creating an atmosphere of luxurious living. Pictures of the love goddess Aphrodite and her consorts add a hint of eroticism. Yet even within this atmosphere of pleasure and indulgence, there are also scenes that jar. In one, Ariadne lies crying on the beach having just been abandoned by her lover Theseus: hardly a comforting image. These very various scenes can cater for a wide range of individual interests among those looking at them, as well as providing backgrounds suitable to various situations of daily life.

Picturing Pompeian Houses

Most Pompeian houses are structured like the House of Meleager. They have a series of areas, each of which contains a different angle on the representation of the owners' status. The entrance and atrium area tend to focus on the family; the large reception rooms around the peristyle on the man. They also have a separate sequence of areas that invite the visitor to the room to become absorbed in stories of various sorts. Entrance areas seem in general to give out bold messages that can be grasped easily, but other areas of the house demand close attention to the particular stages of the stories that are represented, they offer more layers to be perceived and so support longer and more profound meditation.

In every Pompeian house there are individual accents to the structure of the images, which only emerge after close analysis. These general patterns, however, show how watching the wall-paper can generate new perspectives upon the ways in which Pompeians presented themselves to the world, and upon Roman domestic life in general.

Katharina Lorenz has just finished a doctoral dissertation on Pompeian wall painting at the University of Heidelberg.

There are some interesting resources on Pompeii at
http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/archsci/field_proj/anampomp/index.html
<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pompeii/page-1.html>